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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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***Carson small talks way to Washington  
By Chris Casteel -- The Daily Oklahoman***

Washington, D.C. --

Rep. Brad Carson has an impressive resume, Rhodes scholar, White House fellow, top graduate in his class at the University of Oklahoma law school, attorney at the prestigious Oklahoma firm Crowe & Dunlevy.

But when he decided to run for Congress in 1999, it was his experience as night manager of a Tulsa convenience store that helped him on the campaign trail.

"If I looked back and said, 'What's the best training for politics?' I think working as night manager for QuikTrip above all of them because you became an expert in making small talk with people, 'Hey, how are you doing? Good to see you today. What's going on? How's work? Good. See you later.' Just that friendly chatter."

Carson's career trajectory has taken him far beyond his night-shift work and his jobs unloading trucks for Wal-Mart and ushering at a movie theater.

At 35, Carson has just begun his second term in Congress, where he is again the only Democrat in Oklahoma's delegation.

He was virtually unknown in political circles when he began his first campaign, but wound up knocking off a longtime state House member in the primary and then a popular Muskogee car salesman in one of the most closely watched general election races in the country.

This year, with his district greatly expanded to accommodate the loss of a congressional seat, he easily defeated another state House member who had been chairman of the Oklahoma Democratic Party and then trounced his Republican opponent.

He had a busy first term, starting out by pushing for a House committee investigation of conditions in Oklahoma nursing homes and finishing with a legislative victory, aided by Oklahoma's Republican senators, to authorize \$33 million in federal money for a Native American Cultural Center in Oklahoma City.

At the same time, he tended to his political image back home, declining a campaign contribution from Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, the New York Democrat, because of the "sharp divide in opinion" about her. And last month, he supported Rep. Harold Ford, a moderate from Tennessee, over Rep. Nancy Pelosi of California, who is more liberal, for Democratic leader.

Carson's accomplishments speak to his abilities and ambition, and as one of the state's most prominent Democrats, he is considered a prospect for higher office.

"If Brad Carson chooses to seek another office, he definitely has the political skills to do so," said Sean Burrage, a Claremore attorney who was an aide to former Sen. David Boren and is Carson's friend.

Chad Alexander, the former chairman of the Oklahoma Republican Party, said, "We all hear rumors in the state that he wants to run for statewide office. ... I'm sure at 35 he hasn't decided to stay where he is the rest of his life."

Barring something unforeseen, it would be eight years before he could run for governor since a Democrat, Brad Henry, was just elected to that post, and the presumption would be that Henry would run for re-election in 2006.

But there is a chance Sen. Don Nickles, R-Ponca City, won't run for re-election in 2004. Nickles has said he will likely make his intentions known by the end of this year.

Carson said being governor and having executive authority offers the greatest opportunity to have an impact.

"I'm certainly happy in Congress and have enjoyed my time here," he said. "If other openings came up where I thought I could have a greater impact, I would certainly look at them."

An open Senate seat might be too great an opportunity to pass up. The fact that the 2nd District congressional seat was open in 2000 was the reason he pursued his longtime goal to run for office when he did.

He and his wife, Julie, had only been married a month, he had no name recognition and no personal wealth. He and Julie, who also is an attorney, took out a second mortgage on their house and Carson took off in his pickup to every small town he could get to.

"I always told people, 'One of these days I'm going to run for Congress.'"

"It hadn't been an open seat in 26 years. I looked around and saw all of my classmates from Oxford who wanted to be politicians and all of them got distracted in some way. You can find a million excuses not to do it.

"What I realized early on is that you have to find an opportunity, and they come along very rarely in politics, and you have to seize it, even if it's a long shot."

The sword in the stone

Carson has a history of going for long shots and scoring.

He decided to apply to the Rhodes scholarship program as "a bit of lark." No one at Baylor University had won one in about 75 years, he said. He broke that streak.

He competed against more than 1,200 people and won one of a handful of White House fellow positions (and worked for the Defense Department).

"People always ask me, 'How did you get elected to Congress? How do you become a White House fellow?' And I say it's a little bit difficult to explain. Sometimes you're like Arthur pulling the sword out of the anvil. It just happens. And you're as mystified as everyone else about the process."

Carson's friend Burrage said, "The hard work shouldn't be underestimated. Becoming a Rhodes scholar, being chosen as outstanding graduate in your law school and being elected to Congress don't just happen.

"You're talking about a highly intelligent, highly motivated individual."

A big motivator for Carson when he applied for the Rhodes scholarship was the travel. He had seen little of the world, and "Europe and Africa and Asia seemed like a different solar system."

Carson's father, Jack, worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and was assigned to reservations in Nevada, Arizona, North Carolina and Kansas. Carson was born in Arizona.

His mother's Cherokee ancestors were relocated to Oklahoma along the Trail of Tears; she is an Adair, for which the eastern Oklahoma county was named. The Carsons also have been in Oklahoma since before statehood.

"Brad was influenced a lot by my work and moving around," Jack Carson said. "We lived in some very depressed areas. He thought there had to be something better" for the Indian people.

Carson said, "One thing you take away from there is that government matters, for good and for ill. We wouldn't have the Native American population in Oklahoma if it weren't for the government.

"In my congressional district, which is really Indian territory, it's the land of exile. Very few people who have been there for as long as my family has, six generations now,

came there voluntarily. They were exiled there. And people who were exiled there know government matters. Andrew Jackson had an impact on their lives."

Government and politics were popular topics in the Carson home. Jack Carson said Brad and his brother, Chris, would pick sides of an issue and argue it.

"I remember, one of my very earliest memories, we were living in a small town in northeast Kansas, where my father was superintendent of the Kickapoo reservation. I was probably in third or fourth grade. ... My mother drove probably three or four hours to Omaha, Neb., to let me see President Gerald Ford, who was there in town to give a speech.

"They never supported President Ford, had no particular love for him, they were strong Democrats. But they wanted to impress upon me, "This is something you should respect. You should be concerned with who the president is. You should admire who the president is even if you might disagree with his policies."

The calling

Carson and his brother went to Baylor because the school offered full scholarships to National Merit scholars. Carson said he felt like the only Democrat on campus at the conservative Baptist school, and the experience proved valuable when he joined a congressional delegation that had been all Republican.

Carson's time as a Rhodes scholar, from 1989 to 1991, gave him what he wanted, a chance to travel overseas.

"The great thing about Oxford is that you only go to school 24 weeks a year," he said, "and you're paid to travel during the breaks. So I saw everywhere in Europe, all over north Africa and east Africa, Russia."

He went to the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. And he survived a harrowing bus crash in Tanzania when his companion pulled him out through a window shortly before another bus plowed into theirs and killed several people.

Carson also found time for his political interests. He was an intern for the late Rep. Mike Synar, the Muskogee Democrat who held the seat Carson now occupies. And he worked on the 1990 re-election campaign of then-U.S. Sen. David Boren, a man Carson admires for his work in government and in encouraging young people to pursue careers in public service.

Of Boren, he said, "He's somebody who, if I could pattern my career after. ... I think nobody has done as much as he has for Oklahoma since (former governor and U.S. senator) Bob Kerr, and maybe not even Bob Kerr."

Boren also was a Rhodes scholar; so was the late Carl Albert, the Oklahoma congressman who became speaker of the House in 1971.

Jack Carson said he still remembers his son talking with Boren and Albert at a political event and that he could kick himself for not getting a photographer to snap a picture of them.

"Three generations of Rhodes scholars," he said.

Three generations of eastern Oklahoma Democrats who felt called to public service.

"LBJ said there are only three occupations to choose from, be a preacher, a teacher or a politician," Brad Carson said. "And there's really a lot of similarities in each of those in that there's a certain calling aspect to them."

A sixth sense

Alexander said if Carson seeks a statewide office, he won't be able to run from the fact that he's a Democrat in a state that now favors Republicans in most federal elections.

But if Carson is successful in emulating Boren, he will avoid being identified with the national Democratic Party. He will sometimes vote against the majority of his party, as he did in favoring President Bush's tax cuts, and distance himself from the party's divisive figures, as he did in rejecting Clinton's campaign donation.

Burrage, who worked for Boren, said Carson identifies in the same way with Oklahomans as Boren did and knows how to vote the state's interests.

"It's almost like a sixth sense," Burrage said.

Synar often was praised for his courage for voting his convictions, but criticized by others who thought he was out of step with his district.

Carson said, "When I talk to groups, high school kids or college kids, they ask that question: 'Are you voting your conscience or are you voting what the people would do?'"

"And I say that's a false distinction. For me, to believe in democratic politics, to believe in democracy, is to have faith that people know what's right for themselves. And that's the thing that's always guided me. There are times I probably have disagreed with what a flash poll of my constituents would say.

"But what I say is that first of all, I need to rethink my position. Because the collective wisdom of all the farmers and small business people and schoolteachers and stay-at-home moms and preachers and day laborers is really profound.

"And if they feel so passionate about it and disagree with something that's my first impression, then I need to rethink where I am. Because I trust the people to know what's going on."

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